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## The Concept of Identity and its Application to Encounters with Jesus Christ

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The Concept of Identity and its Application  
to Encounters with Jesus Christ

by

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in partial fulfillment of the promotion process

to the rank of Full Professor

Messiah College

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## The Concept of Identity and its Application

### to Encounters with Jesus Christ

There are many ways in which the field of psychology can inform and clarify aspects of the Christian faith. Jones (1994), a notable Christian psychologist, affirms this in an article written for the American Psychologist and many other Christian psychologist have proposed this in their writings (Vande Kemp, 1996; Van Leeuwen, 1996). Among the many psychological concepts relevant to the Christian faith is the concept of identity, first introduced and developed by Erik Erikson (1956). The term itself has been a popular term in the English language for decades, used to describe specifically issues of adolescent development and crises of personality. Although the term is never used in the Bible, the dynamics of identity development and change are throughout Scripture. Therefore, this paper explores various aspects of the psychological concept of identity and its value in understanding what happens when people encounter a change of identity as they come into contact with Christ. In doing so, this paper will first offer a brief definition and overview of the concept of identity. Then, it will describe identity and its importance in the field of psychology. Given that understanding, the biblical narrative of the Gospels and Paul's letters will be used to illustrate how the concept of identity can help in understanding the dynamics of an encounter with Christ. Finally, I will suggest implications for further use of the term in helping people understand their potential for change as they continue in their life in Christ.

### Definition of Identity

#### Dictionary and Psychological Definition

The dictionary offers little insight into the concept of identity, in that identity, as defined relates to "sameness" or "unity and persistence of personality." Taking that as a springboard for a

fuller understanding of identity, the concept is similar to the concept that many psychologists hold for the term “self” (Paranjpe, 1975). The self, or identity, is significant in that there is implied some degree of persistence or consistency over time and situation for each person. That consistency, a person identifies as “me,” or to use another psychological term, the “ego.” However, consistency is not the only important aspect of identity. Also, in order to “identify” aspects that are the same or consistent within an individual, it is important to distinguish between characteristics that are the same in or different from others. This involves a valuable relational component to the term, for inasmuch as persons can identify themselves as a “me,” they must also be able to determine in relationship to themselves and to others what is “not me.” This would lead individuals to say “that’s just not like me” in response to some behavior or thought that seems inconsistent with how they see themselves which might be true of others. Such interaction, or social comparison, then, is also an important component of the term. Erikson (1959) expresses it this way:

The term “identity” expresses such a mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others. (p. 109)

So, first, in defining identity, there is a recognition that identity involves some awareness of continuity and consistency within the person and also some awareness of the sameness or differences between the self and others.

### Identity and Self-Definition

Furthermore, in understanding identity, Baumeister (1986) believes it is important to determine the various ways people can define themselves, or how they are “self-defined.” Self-

definition, or how a person sees himself or herself, is an important component of identity.

Physical/biological self-definition. Obvious ways people are self-defined are through various physical/biological attributes, where there is no real choice to be anything other than what a person is through birth. Sex, family of origin, physical attributes (red-head) are examples of this source of self-defined identity. It is quite common to identify someone according to such physical attributes whenever a person is attempting to point out or introduce another person. Hence, such physical attributes are important and we often find ourselves identifying ourselves in such a way.

Although physical attributes may be uniquely manifested in any individual, some attributes are tied to social expectations or stereotypes which may impact the individual. As a person defines himself or herself by physical attributes, he or she may accept the social expectations of persons with the same attributes. Such expectations may be hard to resist unless a change can occur which alters the attribute. A female who is blond may have a hard time resisting the stereotype of being a “dumb blond” unless she changes her hair color. Whereas, some physical attributes are changeable, others are not or less so, which means that the person has to learn to accept the expectations, or to resist and fight those expectations, or to seek the changing of such expectations which are embedded in the culture.

Achieved status self-definition. Another way people define themselves is through various achievements that are recognized and valued by their society (Baumeister, 1986). Parenthood is a good example where there seems to be a defining moment when someone is transformed from being without a child to having a child to raise. Along with that status comes certain duties and expectations which help define that role and identity. The status, combined with social expectations of that status, enable a person to define himself or herself through certain behaviors

and attitudes which reinforce the identity when implemented. A parent who does not “feel” like a parent will in all likelihood behave differently than someone who as a parent takes on the roles and responsibilities of parenthood. Hence, one can have the status but not clearly identify with the role.

Some achieved identity shifts involve taking on new roles and leaving certain other roles behind. The transition from singlehood to a married person consists of a new way of thinking and behaving. This achieved status involves changing a lifestyle from what could be characterized as self-centered in many ways, to a lifestyle which requires a person to also take in consideration the desires of a spouse. For males, the pre-wedding bachelor party can in some ways represent the recognition of such an identity shift. It is often times characterized as the bachelor’s last “fling” before a different status and different behaviors are expected. Likewise, the success of the shift depends upon how well the person accepts and takes on the responsibilities and behaviors that new identity requires.

Sometimes such an achieved status is more gradual, as in the case of “wealth” or “educational status”. People may identify themselves as “wealthy” or “smart” based on acquisition of some external criteria that they may set for themselves which also may be regarded by society. For example, getting my first job in high school made me “wealthy” yet in another way I would have been regarded below the poverty level if on my own. Likewise, my first job out of graduate school made me feel “wealthy” again, until I realized the greater financial responsibilities that went along with establishing my post-graduate lifestyle. This aspect of self-defining identities is a bit more fluid than something like getting married or becoming a parent, yet both involve a process in which such a transformation serves to define a person in a different way, typically

according to some external criteria.

Personal choices and self-definition. A third self-defining process comes as a result of choices that are less clear and less well-defined in terms of how society views them, and what the criteria are to acquire such identities (Baumeister, 1986). Furthermore, self-defining by way of these choices usually preclude other choices. Choosing a career is a good example here, for most adults are expected to have some career, and many people define themselves primarily by their career. However, one's career choice is basically an independent decision. Such identity choices are rather ambiguous in terms of their specific meaning in the culture. For example, although our culture expects most adults to have a career, the specific choice is not dictated by society. Expectations are less clear and the personal choice involved may have a greater individual than social significance. Typically, these types of choices in self-definition are problematic in that the values and criteria for making a choice are said to be "within" the individual. Choosing a career, a spouse, a religion, all have implications for self-definition, yet guidance in making these choices is typically left up to the individual. Guidance may come in the form of advice from others or by default if a person is expected to take over the family business, or is expected to continue in the religion of the parents. However, these situations demonstrate more or less an abdication of the choice and conceding to accept another's choice for himself or herself. Unless that person can truly take personal ownership of the choice, that person's identity will be somewhat diffused or uncertain. Whereas self-defining grows as self-awareness grows, biological and achieved status definitions are a little easier to grasp and be affirmed in as compared to the types of choices required of a more personal nature. It is these types of personal choices which first confront and confound a person in the adolescent stage of development and can initiate

deeper identity processing which will be discussed below.

### Identity and its Defining Function

In defining identity, it is necessary to also understand the psychological function this phenomena has for the individual. Having an identity can help to define various roles and expectations a person has in negotiating his or her world (Baumeister, 1986). Persons who state “That’s not my job” have a clear understanding of who they are in that circumstance and know at least for themselves what that identity entails. Others may even respond that the person is just avoiding responsibility, but in the mind of the person, he or she knows the role expectations and his or her correct response. This function of identity therefore aids in defining social relationships and social behaviors. With a clear awareness of who she or he is in any social or private context, a person understands how to behave and think within that context.

Whereas identity can aid in guiding behaviors, the converse is also true. Behaviors can aid in producing an emerging identity. This was well-demonstrated by the classic “prison” study conducted by Zimbardo (1972). Zimbardo had college males take on the roles of either guards or prisoners in a prison simulation. As a result of their role playing, “guards” became more and more belligerent and cruel, and “prisoners” became “broken”, rebellious, or passive in their role as prisoners. Hence, the relationship of behaviors to creating, maintaining, and being associated with identities and their function is extremely important.

According to Baumeister (1986) identity can also function in terms of defining potentialities within the person. In light of the above discussion of choices and identity, to choose a religious identity may help people see themselves doing “religious” behaviors, or having “religious” attitudes. Such an identity may empower a person to produce new behaviors and attitudes that are



consistent with the identity. Therefore, identifying oneself as religious may help to release such potential within him or her to become more of a religious person. This identity can enable a person to see his or her own potential in a new light.

Finally, an identity helps to formulate values and priorities which guide the consistency of the individual in a variety of situations (Baumeister, 1986). Again, using the example above, a person with a religious identity may be convinced that such a person, although not perfect, should not lie. In so behaving, the behavior contributes to them becoming more religious or seeing themselves as religious. If a person does not lie, a behavior consistent with the religious moral codes and values, then that person may see him or herself as being religious. Such an identification with the values and behaviors of a religious person, by association, is seen as a validation of that person as religious. The function of identities, be they guiding behaviors, affirming potentials, or promoting values and priorities, can also be reciprocal with those functions. Doing certain behaviors, realizing potentials, and holding certain values can affirm a person's identities as well.

In summary, identity as a concept is related to other psychological concepts such as the self and ego and contains the idea that there is something consistent over time and place within individuals. Identity also provides distinguishing characteristics which can be identified in others as well as set them apart from other individuals. This identity can be self-defined by way of physical/biological means, through various achieved statuses or through more ambiguous decision making processes and choices. Lastly, identity functions by way of helping to define roles and expectations in social relationships, to highlight potentialities within the person, and to establish values and priorities.

### The Importance of Identity in Psychology

#### The Importance of Identity to the Modern Western World

Since the 1960's, there has been a wealth of psychological research and writing describing the nature and value of the concept of identity (Kroger, 2000). Erikson, a student of Freud, was the first psychologist of note to extensively use the term and write about identity (Kroger, 2000). The focus of Erikson's writing on identity stems from his observations of adolescent development. He believes that adolescence as is understood today emerged out of the industrialization of the West. Circumstances faced during the transition from childhood to adulthood became a unique and complex issue. Such a transition in earlier times was much more proscribed, straightforward, and brief, whereas with the increase in urbanization, industrialization, education, and mobility, questions as to when and how adulthood is reached became an increasing problem. Western societies, which at one time provided fairly traditional and limited routes to adulthood, began to prolong the transition and expand the routes possible for attaining adulthood. This situation was rather unique to Western cultures, particularly America at the turn of the twentieth century. Then most westerners believed in unlimited opportunities not realized in other cultures of the world. This has led some to comment that the search for identity in Western societies is related to the available options that such a society can offer. In other words, non-western cultures did not experience adolescence in the same way since their society did not provide alternative objects of identification found in the West (Kroger, 2000). Hence the importance of the concept of identity to the Western world is unique and uses as its focus that stage in life where identity issues first take a prominent position in the psyche.

### The Importance of Identity in Adolescence

According to Erikson (1959), then, it is the adolescent's task to sort through a maze of options to come up with an established identity by early adulthood. However, Erikson notes that identity formation is a lifelong process, beginning in infancy and continuing throughout adulthood. It reaches its critical stage in adolescence. Whereas the biological changes in late childhood (puberty) are seen as the clear marker for when adolescence begins, when it ends is not so clear. Among many of the markers for the end of adolescence, two fairly distinct ones are economic independence from parents and marriage (Paranjpe, 1975). Both of these events clearly offer a new status to the individual, and traditionally they have occurred around the same time in a person's life. Nevertheless, these markers are increasingly problematic for the adolescent as this time period often extends into the early and mid twenties.

Erikson (1968) notes that during adolescence, the adolescent begins to establish a stronger sense of his or her bodily self. Certainly the obvious physiological changes taking place within the adolescent makes it easy to understand why this becomes a focus. As a youth adapts to these physical changes in a healthy way, he or she can incorporate those changes into a personal identity. As a result, there are certain shifts in self-definitions associated with these changes as they relate to physiology. Also, the adolescent is developing social relationships that extend beyond the parental controls, such controls, which up to late childhood, were fairly evident in a normal family relationship. This is also contributing to the shift in status from identities associated with the family to those associated with their friends and their own social subculture. Furthermore, the adolescent is forming preferences, feelings, needs, abilities and desires which represent the psychological aspects of identity formation. Here, they are interacting with their

world and their selves in a more self-conscious manner, becoming more psychologically aware of their personal similarities with and differences from others. In terms of self-definitions, they are beginning to discover preferences and desires which will aid in their making of choices that will define them as unique individuals. For example, some youth chose to take on a religious identity. This identity is rather personal; in most cases it is neither an achieved status nor an imposed identity. Nevertheless, it influences their social life and how they are perceived by others. It is the dynamic tensions occurring physically, socially and psychologically where identity formation gets its energy. And it is the resolution of this dynamic tension to a large degree which launches the adolescent into early adulthood. Furthermore, to varying degrees, these three areas continue to influence identity formation well beyond adolescence and throughout adulthood as physiological, societal, and psychological changes continue to impact the individual.

#### The Importance of Identity to Adulthood

The Eriksonian understanding of identity involves a distinction between the overall identity and its formation and identity as it relates to specific domains (Skorikov and Vondracek, 1998). Erikson (1968) emphasized the importance of ideological, occupational and sexual areas for identity formation in adolescents. Furthermore, the last chapter of his book focuses on racial identity, particularly the experience of African Americans. These four areas tend to continue to be important areas of specific identities in adulthood. Such a focus on a specific aspect of a person's identity can highlight its social importance, even if it is not important to any one individual. Nevertheless, it is true that although an overall identity is made up of various roles or specific identities, often one identity can take prominence over the others. Kelly (1955) refers to this phenomena as taking on a "core role" and Allport (1961) refers to it as a cardinal trait. When

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a person takes on a core role or cardinal trait, all other experiences, behaviors, thoughts and feelings tend to be filtered through that role or primary identity. For example, studies of people with a core role as an athlete have found that they may experience a variety of emotional and social adjustment difficulties upon the termination of their careers (Grove, Lavalley, and Gordon, 1997). Erikson (1968) wrote at length on the importance of a occupational identity in relation to overall identity across the lifespan as well as in the initial stages of identity formation. Other types of specific identities can also take on a high degree of significance, such as gender, sexual orientation, and race, to name the most prominent. Alteration of any of these core roles either through self-perception or social constructions can have dramatic effects on adults, similar to those mentioned above with athletes whose core roles were altered upon retirement.

In summary, the importance of the term identity is unique to the West or at least to cultures where there are multiple ways and options involved in the process of identity formation or self-definition. This process, although occurring across the lifespan, takes on even greater importance during adolescence, when the psychological aspects and choices of self-definition become more prominent than in childhood. In adulthood, the overall identity may give way to certain specific identities which take on a higher degree of significance than the others, which then guide or control all other identities subsumed by it.

Given the above background and development of the concept of identity, the remainder of this paper focuses on understandings gained from the study of the impact that Christ has on people's identity who have come into contact with him, using as sources both the biblical text and present day religious experiences with Christ. However, before undertaking that task, several assumptions concerning the biblical text must be made explicit. I assume that the biblical

narrative is accurate in what it describes and will treat it as such. I assume the context of the biblical narrative is first century Israel, where such issues of identity were much more culturally proscribed. For example, concerning Jesus, we know that his “father” Joseph was a carpenter (Matt. 13:55) and that Jesus in his early years took the trade of his father (Mark 6:3). This would be common in cultures where identities were more assigned. Likewise, I assume the way people are described in the text are very much more descriptive of that person’s core role or cardinal trait than what might be thought of today. For instance, reference to a blind man or a paralytic in Christ’s day is much more descriptive of that person’s whole life experience than today when I describe the well-known Christian musician Ken Medema as a blind man, or Joni Erikson Tada as a paraplegic. Finally, in reading the text, I assume an educated layperson’s understanding of the text and not that of a Bible or New Testament scholar.

### Encounters with Christ and His Impact on Identity

#### Identity as a Shift in Self-Definitions

As one reads the gospels, one consistent theme is Christ’s interaction with a variety of individuals in ways that change the way that individual sees himself or herself. Often these individuals are described in terms of their social status, which can be assumed to be a large part of their identity. Fishermen, prostitutes, lepers, tax collectors, a Roman centurion, Sadducees and pharisees all are functioning largely on the basis of their designation. Therefore, most Bible scholars attempt to understand what those labels mean to the actors in the text. Hence, we know that tax collectors were largely despised, lepers were social outcasts, centurions were antagonistic and imperialistic, and Sadducees and pharisees were highly revered and regarded to the first century Jew. These roles were fairly well defined and the expectations associated with these roles

fairly well proscribed. This becomes notable when we consider the dramatic shifts in social identities when such people encounter Christ. We can first see this in healings of those with physical ailments.

Identity shifts due to physical self-definitions. Most people Christ healed were identified by their physical ailment-- a blind man (Mark 10:46), lepers (Luke 17:12), a woman with a “flow of blood” (Luke 8:43), a paralytic (Matt. 9: 2), and so on. One obviously radical identity shift is when any one of these people are healed. Such a dramatic experience changes the way a person sees (in some cases literally) himself or herself and the world. Their guiding identity in life is changed in an instant. It may seem less curious for Christ to ask the question, “What do you want?” of a blind man who comes to him (Mark 10:51), or the ill man at the pool of Bethesda “Do you wish to get well” (John 5:6), when you realize the implications such a healing will have on that individual. Their response to such a question is almost seen as a willingness to accept their new identity. Often with such a healing, Christ affirms a characteristic within the individual, reinforcing their new social identity with a previously dormant or unrecognized spiritual identity by claiming, “Your faith has healed you”(Matt 9:22, 15:28; Mark 5:34, 10:52; Luke 8:48). Certainly those healed are caused to ponder what Christ means when he refers to their faith as instrumental in their healing, especially in light of the fact that physical ailments in that day were often seen as unrighteousness or a lack of faith.

Given the above understanding of identity then, we can assume that Christ’s healing did more than just transform them physically. It gave these people a new social position and status, new roles and responsibilities, new social relationships, new potentialities, and new values and priorities, as well as having their own faith affirmed. The act of physical healing takes on a

tremendously greater import when these other factors related to the shift in identity are included. Their acceptance and faithfully acting upon this new identity may be more significant than the healing itself. And it is this faith which Christ often affirms.

Whereas acts of physical healing undoubtedly alter a person's identity, there is little indication beyond the healing as to how it is played out in any of the individuals Christ heals. One out of the ten lepers returns to thank Jesus, the Samaritan, for whom Christ affirms his faith (Luke 17: 15,16). The paralytic picked up his pallet and went home (Matt. 9:7). Peter's mother-in-law, once healed, got up and served Christ and his disciples (Mark 1:31). In one instance, the newly healed Gerasene demoniac shared he desired to follow Christ. Yet Christ told him to go home and share what He had done for him to his friends. Scripture says he did this (Mark 5: 18-20). Interestingly, this event occurred on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, territory whose people were unfriendly to Christ and were probably not even Hebrew. They begged him to go away after the healing. This is also the place where Christ later returned to feed a crowd of four thousand men plus women and children who had listened to his teaching for three days straight (Matt. 15: 32ff). It can be assumed that the people who once begged Christ to leave were the same who listened to Him for three days, probably due to the influence of the demoniac's testimony of a changed life. This crowd in all likelihood would not have been there had not the one-time "Gerasene demoniac" done his job.

Identity shifts due to achieved status. Along with relating to those identified by some physical disorder, Christ also transformed those who had some kind of achieved status such as the Roman centurion, tax collectors, the educated Pharisees and scribes, and people of wealth. Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) was described as a "chief tax collector, and rich". When Christ encountered him



He called him in to a relationship with Himself as Christ invited Himself into Zacchaeus' home. The transformation of identities for Zacchaeus was immediately evident when he announces, "Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Luke 19:8). Christ affirms his faith by saying, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9). Encounters with Christ produce behavioral changes which point to an internal change in identities. For Zacchaeus, as far as can be known, he may still have continued as a tax collector, for there was legitimacy to that position as Rome occupied Israel at the time, yet the manner in which he did things was sure to change based upon a new identity given to him by Christ.

Whereas, typically we think of Christ always being affirming and positive, we see another side of Christ when he deals with the Pharisees and scribes. These groups of men were considered among the most learned of the Jews. In all likelihood, they were proud of their status within the culture. We get some indication of this in Luke 18:10-12 where Christ describes a Pharisee as one who, "stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.'" In contrast to many Christ responded to compassionately, we find Him quite harsh toward the Pharisees. He calls them a "brood of vipers" (Matt. 12:33), "hypocrites" (Matt. 23:15), and children of the devil (John 8:44). His conversation with them in John 8 is quite revealing, given an understanding of identity. In this passage, Christ debates with the Pharisees over their heritage, something the Pharisees took exceptional pride in, referring to themselves as children of Abraham. Where the Pharisees described their physical heritage, Christ spoke to their spiritual heritage when he said, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do

what Abraham did....” Later when they likewise referred to God, He said, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded and came forth from God” (John 8:39, 42). Here there is an example of where the social status does not meet the spiritual and behavioral expectations of Christ. One might suggest that the Pharisees have an ill-defined identity where they have prematurely established outward signs of the identity without regard for the spiritual criteria of the identity. Again, it should be noted that Christ reserves most of his harshest criticism for the outwardly religious. The Pharisees, in understanding their physical heritage correctly, strongly yet prematurely identified with it, yet they had not gone far enough in their identity development to accept the spiritual values and behaviors which Christ pointed out would characterize their completed identity as children of Abraham or God. Their identification was merely a false front, not of the heart or by faith. When such an identity was challenged, the Pharisees demonstrated an unwillingness to change and furthermore sought to bolster their authority by intending to stone Him (John 8: 59). Kelly (1955) suggests that when core roles are threatened in this way that one response is to become even more rigid in that role. This, he claims, is an unhealthy response to such a threat. If there is an identity change at all by the Pharisees it is toward a greater hardening of their hearts toward Christ and His message.

This unwillingness to change is also demonstrated in the story of the rich young ruler (Mark 10:18). Christ did not challenge him on religious grounds or question whether he was telling the truth when the man claimed to have followed all the commandments. Christ was able to see that although the man wanted to appear religious, his true identity, his “core role” was wrapped up in wealth, and this is what Christ targeted. The text describes the man going away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. Yet such a disclosure by Christ was apparently not met with the same

animosity or rigidity as his confrontation with the Pharisees, leading some to project that maybe after pondering the truth of what Christ said, this young man may have had a change of heart.

The above discussion of identity shifts reflect the psychological understanding that people define themselves by physical/biological characteristics (e.g. blindness, lepers) and by achieved statuses (centurion, wealthy, Pharisee). When the above people encountered Christ, there was a definitive shift in the way they defined themselves. Christ's impact on their lives was that they were no longer like they were before meeting Christ. The most obvious impact mentioned above was on Zacchaeus, who gave back fourfold what he had stolen. Likewise, we can infer that the Gerasene demonic became a successful witness for Christ in the area beyond Galilee. Previous to meeting Christ, these behaviors would have not been characteristic of these individuals in the least. In a similar sense, I must believe that the Pharisees as well were not prone to desire the death of a fellow teacher and follower of the law. But as Christ himself said, "each tree is known by its fruit" (Luke 6:44). Their lives seemed obviously consumed with maintaining their own religious status and concerned with what society thought of them to the neglect of what God thought of them (Matt. 6:2, 5). Jesus defied such religious and hypocritical identities.

Christ often identified a person's identity through their behaviors, just as the psychological discussion of identity proposes that behaviors reflect a person's identity. For example, Christ often spoke about the pursuit of wealth and material possessions. Such behaviors demonstrate how these people ultimately define themselves, for as Christ states, "where your treasure is there will your heart be also" (Luke 12: 34). The question comes down to, "How does a person define himself or herself?" Is it through the acquisition of material wealth, or is it the pursuit of things of the kingdom? Hence, it is understandable why the rich young ruler of Luke 18 went away sad.

Christ's interaction with the Pharisees, the rich young ruler, those in need of healing, and others identified in Scripture illustrate how identities can be understood in light of psychological terms, yet to fully appreciate an understanding of the concept of identity and its implications, one must turn to Christ's interaction with those closest to Him-- His disciples.

Identity shift through personal choices. Whereas many of the above shifts in identity can be associated with some degree of a personal choice to encounter Christ, the most clear expressions of choice involve the calling and response of the disciples to Christ. As mentioned above in the discussion of self-definitions involving personal choices, they can be the most difficult to make because they are based more on internal rather than external, more socially acceptable criteria. Nevertheless, when Christ gave the call to come follow Him, Scripture states that at least for the fishermen he called, "they left the boat and their father, and followed him"(Matt. 4:22). To a very large degree they left their old identity, their status, their livelihood, and their families for an uncertain future with a person they ultimately put their faith and trust in. Embarking on this journey, they confronted their identities in new and challenging, and even threatening ways. For example, after some especially difficult words spoken to the multitudes, many began to leave Christ. Christ responds by asking His disciples if they too wanted to leave. Peter replies, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68,69). Peter had identified so much with Christ that there was nothing else that could direct him away from Him. To Peter, there was no turning back while Christ was still present.

Even though the disciples had left everything to follow Christ, they still packed a lot of personal baggage and identities that needed attention. Although they had nowhere else they

desired to be than with Christ, they still exerted their individual identities among themselves. For example, there arose among them a discussion of who would be the greatest in heaven and who would get to sit in the place of prominence next to Christ in the coming kingdom (Mark 10:35-45). In essence, the disciples were wanting Christ to establish some sort of social order among them where some would end up greater than others--to achieve a higher status than others. As mentioned above concerning the development of identities, they involve the interaction of one's physical, social and psychological identities, this situation becomes an excellent example of such an interaction. The disciples who brought up this issue, James and John, were known as the "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17) and certainly because of their physical prowess they felt it would only be right if they could have the seats of prominence. James and John still thought that their physical identities would have some bearing on their place in the kingdom, not even understanding the social and psychological implications of what Christ asked them (Can they drink the cup that He drinks--referring to His death). Without hesitation, they said "We are able". Christ, knowing that they really did not understand what it meant to fully identify with Him, elaborated on what it meant to identify with Him by contrasting their new identities with their more common understandings:

You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45).

If anything, Christ was trying to impress upon His disciples that servanthood was to be a "core

role” and a distinguishing behavior of those who followed Him.

Christ’s interaction with His disciples could be seen as based upon their choice to give up their current identities and to take on the new identity as a follower of Christ. This overall identity was to need development just as any development in an adolescent would require. Hence, we see often in the disciples’ encounter with Christ the sort of exploration and discovery expected for that identity to be formed. Christ affirmed them and bestowed upon them new specific identities (fishers of men, salt and light, friend, Rock) but also let them know that they were still in process (oh, you of little faith). This identity in Christ was to be in contrast to the worldly identities they had known, where servanthood was to be their core role. Christ was their ever present example, even up to their last time together in the upper room during the last supper. Furthermore, upon His resurrection and appearance to them, He breathed on them to receive the Holy Spirit (John 20:22), which was to serve as the enabler of their new identity and to guide them in how to walk in the truth (John 16:13).

#### Affirmation of Identity Shifts through the Eyes of Paul

Although the transformation of identities in Christ’s disciples are clear, the New Testament also bears witness to people who were impacted by Christ yet never knew Him in His earthly form. Foremost among these is the Apostle Paul. Through his Damascus Road experience (Acts 9) there was a dramatic transformation of his identity from being a chief persecutor of Christians, to their chief spokesperson by whom much of the New Testament was written. His relationship with the churches he wrote to and the letters that reflect that, provide further insight into the relevance of the concept of identity with those post-ascension experiences of Christ.

Briefly, throughout Paul’s letters to Christians across Asia Minor and Italy, Paul is often

reminding his audience of their identity in Christ. He does this by reminding his audience what they were like before believing in Christ and then bringing to mind what they were like now in Christ, or by contrasting life in the flesh with life in the Spirit or by recounting the transformation Christ worked in Paul, himself. For example, in Ephesians, Paul writes:

Therefore, remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands--remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. (Ephesians 2:11-13)

Paul repeats this pattern of description in other letters as well (I Cor. 6:9-11; II Cor. 12:20-13:5; Gal. 3:23-4:9, 5:13-25; Col. 3:5-17; I Thess. 1:9; I Tim. 1:12-17; Titus 3:3-8). Throughout his letters he reminds his audience how to behave and think as Christians, admonishing them to find themselves worthy of the Gospel that has been preached to them. In Galatians particularly, he defines their new identity by claiming,

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Gal. 3:27-29)

Each one of these contrasts above describe a certain status which being in Christ has destroyed. No one status is better or worse than the other. One's identity in Christ has leveled the relationships between antagonistic roles. A large part of Paul's letters to the churches are

affirmations of who they are in Christ and encouragement to act accordingly. Again, the relationship between identity and behavior is demonstrated where it is from our identity in Christ that we are empowered to behave like him.

### Contemporary Experiences of Christ and Identity Change

Scripture contains examples of many people who were transformed by encountering Jesus Christ. It also speaks of the potential each one has in Christ. As mentioned above, such an identity should direct behavior, encourage potentials, and provide values and priorities. Much of Paul's letters affirm these things. However, in order for this paper to be complete, there must be a recognition that an encounter with Christ today can still alter identities. This documentation is rare in the literature of psychology, as religious identities have not been much of a focus in psychological research (Youniss, McLellan, and Yates, 1999). However, Youniss et al. (1999) have presented some research which indicates religious identities do seem to relate to greater community service. They found that youth who had a religious identity by indicating that religion was important to them were three times more likely to be engaged in service than those who indicated that religion was not important to them. This is notable in that relationships such as these between identity and behavior begin to emerge in adolescence as the physiological, social and psychological aspects of identity interact. Such behavior would be consistent with a religious identity. Since those surveyed were in part Christian youth, it can be assumed that at least some of them would also say they would identify with Christ and what He represents.

Furthermore, an even more significant study of the impact of faith in Christ on individuals today involves a study of sexual identity reconstruction. Recently Ponticelli (1999) writes of sexual identity reconstruction occurring in the Christian organizations affiliated with Exodus



International. In addition, this article is astounding because the author herself claims in the article to be a lesbian. Based upon her observations she writes,

The personal confession of sin and acceptance of Jesus as a personal savior symbolizes that the confessor has been granted a new life in Christ...Thus, ex-gays who confess their “sins” are symbolically killed and reborn...ex-lesbians (are) expected to maintain or reconstruct their old self for the sake of their new self. (p. 164)

This above pattern is similar to the writings of John in his first letter where he says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1:9), and also follows the pattern of Paul mentioned above by reminding ex-gays of their old selves for the sake of their new selves. Ponticelli analyzes the steps in identity reconstructing which goes right along with the principles of identity development articulated by Erikson (1968). She describes that a person needs to first adopt a new “universe of discourse” and a “biographical reconstruction”, basically meaning that the person must adopt a new ideological identity and interpret oneself according to that identity. Then, the person must adopt a new way of verbalizing what has happened which is essentially the ability to self-define in declarative, definitive statements. This aspect would be akin to confessing and giving testimony concerning the change. Thirdly, the person must accept the new role, or attain identity achievement, and fourthly, the person must maintain strong social supports in order to successfully establish the change. This stage would be comparable to Erikson’s recognition that identity formation is the result of biological, social and psychological forces where the presence of social supports helps to establish the new identity. Ponticelli further suggests that such a pattern of identity change can be helpful in a variety of identity transformations which would also

follow from a belief system which claims, in the words of Christ, “All things are possible to him who believes” (Mark 9:23).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has described the concept of identity as it is known in the field of psychology. Identity was defined as an awareness of continuity and consistency within the person with an accompanying awareness of the sameness and differences between himself or herself and others. Identity involves self-defining along different dimensions of physiology/biology, achieved status, and personal choices. It also functions to direct behaviors, identify potentials, and provide values and priorities. Furthermore, its importance to the Western world highlights the uniqueness of choices and alternative objects of identification available in contrast to other non-western cultures. It is also important as a concept for understanding adolescent development and adult development. Such an understanding of identity aided in the interpretation of biblical examples of people who encounter Christ. An encounter with Christ was able to influence identities in many of the above ways, physically, socially and personally. An encounter with Christ was demonstrated to have had dramatic transforming effects or it was demonstrated to be a gradual journey of growth and development. Regardless, the examples found in Paul’s letters demonstrate the importance of reminders of Christ’s transforming effects on a person’s life. These reminders enable a person to more fully “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which (he or she) has been called” as Paul encourages in Ephesians 4:1. As further research into the impact of identity development and transformation occurs, such an understanding can provide a framework for those who have had a personal encounter with Jesus Christ today and how they can experience His transforming power.



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